

# Missioners experience Appalachian culture

"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

By Barbara Ann Homick  
Staff writer

When Glen Cerosaletti and Andrew Weidmann took a week out of their busy college schedules to work with the Glenmary Home Missioners, they didn't realize the impact their "works of mercy" would have on their lives.

The Glenmary Home Missioners is a society of apostolic life founded by Father William Howard Bishop in 1939. Glenmary priests and brothers, along with numerous volunteers, work to establish the Catholic church in 36 mission areas in 12 states.

Cerosaletti, a senior at the University of Rochester, and Weidmann, a freshman at Hobart College, learned about Glenmary's weeklong mission-volunteer program through bulletin-board announcements at their respective colleges.

Cerosaletti began toying with the idea of mission work in the spring of 1989. Since he was planning to spend the upcoming summer working on his family's dairy farm in Oneonta, N.Y., he figured one week of farm work in Appalachia wouldn't be so bad.

A month after he applied for volunteer status, the 19 year old was accepted into the Glenmary program. As he drove 13 hours from his home in Oneonta to the Glenmary headquarters in Cincinnati in July, 1989, the sophomore became a little apprehensive.

"As I drove down, I didn't know what to expect," he recalled. "I kept wondering if they were going to sling me into vocations."

Cerosaletti was surprised to find that a sales pitch for the priesthood was not on his agenda with Glenmary. But he wasn't surprised by the crude surroundings that greeted him upon his arrival in Vanceburg, Ky., and he attributed his sense of comfort to the fact that rural ministry was what had attracted him to the program in the first place.

"Where I live in the Catskills is the northern part of the Appalachians," he explained. "Although Vanceburg is more poor and the farms are in back hollows, it is similar to where I live, so I was more used to it than those coming from urban areas."

On the night of his arrival, the farm staff — two Glenmary priests and two brothers — gathered with the 30 volunteers for an orientation session and communal dinner. It was the beginning of what Cerosaletti



Volunteers at the Glenmary Home Missioners' Farm in Vanceburg, Ky., welcome other workers home at the end of each day.

said proved to be a rewarding week.

Over the course of the four days, Cerosaletti and the other volunteers worked on several projects, including farm maintenance jobs, work with disadvantaged children at a day-care center, construction work that involved building and remodeling homes, and visits to a nursing home and a home for mentally disturbed adults.

Cerosaletti said he found

working at the day-care center to be the most challenging.

"It was very trying for me to keep (the children) interested in reading or whatever we were doing at the time," he said, noting that he felt the most comfortable while helping out at the nursing home because he had volunteered before at the Park Hope Nursing Home in Rochester.

Although he said the work experiences were adventures, Cerosaletti noted that the high point of the week was the outdoor Mass celebrated on the final night of his stay.

"The Liturgy of the Word was held around a campfire, but for the Liturgy of the Eucharist we processed to a hollow where a stream runs from the mountain," he recalled. "It was an amazing feeling to

be surrounded by the trees and the woods."

Although the weather was much colder when Andrew Weidmann visited the Glenmary farm in December of 1990, he also noted the beauty of the outdoor closing Mass.

"It looked and felt like a natural chapel," Weidmann said of the setting.

Even though the Hobart freshman was assigned tasks similar to those done by Cerosaletti, he said he had the opportunity of becoming involved with some holiday-oriented projects, too.

For instance, Weidmann and the Glenmary volunteers helped fill more than 500 Christmas baskets for a community project and sang Christmas carols at the nursing home.

He also had some excitement during the week when the farm area flooded as a result of heavy rains. In fact, the volunteers had to tie the outhouse to a tree to keep it from floating away.

For many volunteers, the outhouse became a symbol of the poverty they experienced on their missionary stays. Appalachia is an economically underdeveloped area, and most of the families in Vanceburg live in trailer homes.

The Glenmary Missioners own only a farm house, a staff house, a tobacco barn, and the outhouse.

Although Cerosaletti had to bathe in the river and Weidmann

had to travel 30 miles into town to take his only shower of the week, neither volunteer seemed to mind his circumstances. In fact, both said those circumstances helped them appreciate the culture and lifestyle of the Appalachian people. "It gave me a chance to see how I reacted to these people, because people normally tend to look down on them," said Weidmann, a graduate of Palmyra-Macedon High School and a member of St. Patrick's Parish in Macedon. "It helped me understand and respect their life and their culture."

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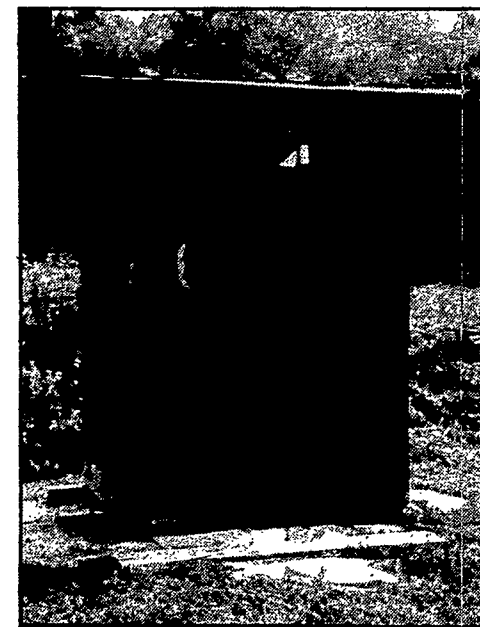
Cerosaletti described feelings similar to those of Weidmann. He said that when the volunteers gathered with the natives of Vanceburg for evenings of discussion and sharing, they learned to appreciate the differences of the people of Lewis County.

"It was meaningful to serve others," the Oneonta native observed. "Learning about them helped me to develop myself."

Cerosaletti also said he was impressed with the "subtle mission work" performed by the Glenmary staff. He stressed that it is important not to change the Appalachian culture, but to accept it and set an example of Catholic service.

Cerosaletti, who returned to Vanceburg in the summer of 1990, said he hopes to go back again in the future. Weidmann also wants to return to the mission.

"The experience sparked an interest in me that I would like to continue to think about," he concluded. "Something is calling me back to do this kind of work."



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